
Enduring Rivalries in the Asia-Pacific. Steve Chan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 234 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-04143-1.

ENDURING RIVALRIES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC is a bold attempt to critically examine dominant pessimistic discourses—particularly among U.S.-dominated structural realist and neoclassical realist literature—on the intensification of “enduring rivalries” in the Asia-Pacific due to “China’s Rise” and the changes in military capabilities among economically growing states. In contrast, Chan argues that despite continuing tensions, the intensity of such rivalries is declining. And despite China’s rise, Asia-Pacific states are moving towards more peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, he challenges structural realist fears, particularly those that look at changes in state capabilities without “addressing changing Chinese motivations—or motivations of other states” in the region (107). The analysis of historical precedents reconceptualizes “enduring rivalries” by examining the domestic “structure” of opportunities and decision-making “agency” with incentives to act aggressively or otherwise.

Understanding Capabilities and Intentions

Chapter two reviews the concept of “rivalry” and problematizes the “highly asymmetric capabilities” of “many contentious dyads” (34–38) as well as territorial/positional motivations behind rivalries (49–53). Chapter five continues the discussion on capabilities and motivations (106), where current, dominant discourse on the rise of China has the tendency to emphasize changing capabilities of states in the region, rather than their shifting intentions vis-a-vis such capabilities “to act aggressively” (107). In contrast, Chan analyzes such motivations behind recent cases of tensions in the Asia-Pacific by looking into “opportunity and willingness”—that is, opportunities for decision-making as determined by structure and the willingness of officials “to account for the choices they do make—or fail to make” (132).

Chan explains that states engaged in “enduring rivalries” have been exposed to considerable changes, as evidenced by their openness to international interactions since the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, the understanding of rivalries in the Asia-Pacific is incomplete without looking into the “history of foreign influences” associated with the Cold War and more recently, the interaction between China and the U.S. Thus, these historic strategic relations and internal structure-agency conditions account for the lack of willingness of Asia-Pacific states to “revise the existing international order” that allows “openness” and “interconnectivity,” and to resolve the conflicts by military means despite “increased capabilities” (157).

Being Realist

Chapter one states the problem on the “intensification of interstate rivalries” in Asia, which tends to look at “local rivalries” as separate from the “decisive influence of strategic competition between leading powers” (1) and “third party involvement” (7–15). For instance, there seems to be an engagement in pessimistic discourses in the Asia-Pacific, associating China’s rise with the intensification of “enduring rivalries.” This is a view contrary to the Deutsch-defined concept of a peaceful “security community.” A core concern is that a rising China “may not compete for territorial control alone” (52) in the classical geopolitical interpretation of regional power behaviour. Domestic political interests exist, such as “regime legitimacy and ethnic politics” that can be linked to territorial disputes to ensure “influence and status” by participating in geopolitical “positional rivalries.” Furthermore, for a structural realist, historical Asian rivalries are less “about the Asian countries’ conduct” than about the U.S. being a “pivotal participant in Asian rivalries.” U.S. policies and “relations with China are more important variables” than contextual “ecological conditions” such as the culture, ideology, politics or economy of Asian countries (52–53).

Structural realism treats economic exchanges among nations as a “double-edged sword.” Positive developments in business/economic interests among states might result in increasing popular discontent, particularly in the case where “these exchanges contribute to economic dislocation” or to political insecurity at a time of economic stagnation. The local problems may “become a fuse for a wider multilateral conflict” that escalate to interstate conflictual behaviour beyond initial low-intensity disputes. For example, the Chinese boycott of “Japanese products and manufacturing stoppages at Japanese firms in China” in the context of Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute in 2012 seemed to have brought financial losses to the states higher than “those caused by the 2011 tsunami” (78–79).

Declining Rivalries

Chan concludes chapter four by stating that “Asia-Pacific is closer to a unipolar than bipolar system,” wherein China would avoid “a costly arms race” in the region due to a “significant power asymmetry,” even though this might not prevent “Sino-American military confrontation” (102) or “occasional tension” in the region (105). Chan concedes that although there are continuous incidents of Militarized Interstate Disputes, the “general trend points to declining regional tension,” which coincides with the increased intra-Asian trade and multilateralism (79). This finding comes from chapter three, a data-rich discussion on “Interstate Acrimony” in the Asia-Pacific focusing on conflict frequency, defense spending, trade statistics, membership in multilateral organizations, direct flights between major airports and public attitudes towards foreign countries. However, trade does not necessarily guarantee peaceful coexistence; on the contrary, it adds more variables to be managed in interstate and multilateral relations. Still, the successes in intra-Asian trade and in the overall increasing trend of intra-Asian economic activities would be impossible if rivalries were intensifying (79).

Chapter six emphasizes the importance of states' economic performance as part of their national interests, which transforms the economy through "liberalization" and improved connectivity, despite the "democratic deficit" in China (154) and ASEAN member-states. Chapter seven continues the discussion on "economic connectivity" by adding the issue of "states' incentives and motivations" (25) sustaining the domestic political legitimacy of elites and their continuous influence linked to economy (160). Chapter eight concludes with a generalization on the "evolving Asia-Pacific relations" through cases of "reconciliation"—"historical and comparative context whereby enemies have turned into friends or at least good neighbors" (26).

Chan's limited treatment of "structure-agency" constituting a society's identity results in an incomplete break from the realist rationale towards a more contextualized discursive interpretation of socio-political norms to explain the condition of diminished tensions among Asia-Pacific rivals. Furthermore, the underlying realist assumption about actors/states being 'rational' in decision-making limits the complete shift to the normative contextualization of rivalries, particularly those that are not strictly 'rational.' Overall, the book provides a valuable contribution to existing literatures on critical perspectives on the impact of "China's Rise" on the enduring rivalries in the region. It is highly recommended for academic professionals and policy-makers interested in the Asia-Pacific.

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